

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1955

Volume XVI, Number 20

Rachel W. Coffin, Editor

Week of October 31, 1955

1955 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres in Other Years

Original Reviews Appeared
In These Volumes

Stage Play	1954 Vol.	Page
Anastasia		192
Anniversary Waltz		339
Bad Seed (The)		223
*Boy Friend (The)		299
Caine Mutiny Court Martial (The)		382
Dear Charles		316
*Fanny		256
Flowering Peach (The)		196
House of Flowers		189
Lunatics and Lovers		219
Mrs. Patterson		231
*Pajama Game (The)		324
Peter Pan		273
Quadrille		259
Rainmaker (The)		264
Reclining Figure		294
Saint of Bleeker Street (The)		199
Sandhog		239
Tender Trap (The)		282
Wedding Breakfast		243
What Every Woman Knows		208
*Witness for the Prosecution		216

1953 Vol.

Can-Can	304
Kismet	198
Solid Gold Cadillac (The)	222
Tea and Sympathy	266
*Teahouse of the August Moon (The)	254

1952 Vol.

Seven Year Itch (The)	186
-----------------------	-----

1951 Vol.

Fourposter (The)	190
------------------	-----

*Asterisks indicate shows scheduled
to play week of October 31, 1955

1955 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres During 1955

Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	Page	Stage Play	Page
All in One	325	*No Time for Sergeants	238
Almost Crazy	298	Once Upon a Tailor	305
Ankles Aweigh	329	Othello	285
*Bourgeois Gentilhomme (Le)	230	Phoenix '55	317
*Bus Stop	346	Pirates of Penzance (The)	
Carefree Tree (The)	249	(see headline note, page 275)	
*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof	342	*Plain and Fancy	382
Catch a Star!	290	Princess Ida	
*Chalk Garden (The)	227	(see headline note, page 275)	
Champagne Complex	334	*Roomful of Roses (A)	241
*Damn Yankees	310	Ruddigore	
Dark Is Light Enough (The)	357	(see headline note, page 275)	
Day by the Sea (3)	279	Seventh Heaven	302
*Deadfall	224	*Silk Stockings	354
*Desk Set (The)	234	Skin of Our Teeth (The)	293
Desperate Hours (The)	370	Southwest Corner (The)	374
*Diary of Anne Frank (The)	257	3 For Tonight	337
Doctor's Dilemma (The)	397	*Tiger at the Gates	264
Festival	393	Time of Your Life (The)	390
Grand Prize (The)	385	Tonight in Samarkand	365
Henry IV, Part I	282	Trial by Jury	
H.M.S. Pinafore		(see headline note, page 275)	
(see headline note, page 275)		*View From the Bridge (A)	272
Honeys (The)	314	Wayward Saint (The)	362
*Inherit the Wind	322	*Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?	246
Island of Goats	260	Wisteria Trees (The)	377
Iolanthe	275	Wooden Dish (The)	254
Master Builder (The)	349	Yeomen of the Guard (The)	
*Mikado (The)		(see headline note, page 275)	
(see headline note, page 275)		*Young and Beautiful (The)	267

CRITIC'S CIRCLE AWARD..... 340

Theatre Openings

"Deadfall" "The Desk Set"
"The Chalk Garden"
"Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme"

*Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of October 31, 1955

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST

NEW YORK MIRROR

NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Deadfall"

DAILY NEWS

October 28, 1955

The Case of the Missing Critic, Or, What Happens in 'Deadfall'

By A COPYREADER

A crumpled and stained typescript was found under a desk in this office shortly before midnight last night. The stains, which looked like blood but may have been tomato

juice and vodka, have been sent to Dr. Robert Dwyer, Chief Medical Examiner, for analysis. The typescript itself, which seems to be part of the record of a trial in court, is herewith reproduced in print, to be submitted as evidence in case there has been foul play.

Q. What is your name and what do you do? A. John Chapman. I am, and do help me God, a drama critic.

Q. Where the hell, if you will pardon the expression ladies and gentlemen of the jury, were you at 8 o'clock tonight? A. I was in a nice seat at the Holiday Theatre, southwest corner of Broadway and 47th St.

Q. What the—what were you doing there? A. Waiting for the curtain to go up on a melodrama by Leonard Lee titled "Deadfall."

Q. What happened? A. The curtain went up.

Q. On what? A. A courtroom scene, beautifully designed and lighted by Ralph Alswang.

Q. Was anybody there? A. Oh, yes. Actors, if you call actors anybody.

It's a Murder Trial

Q. Name and describe some.

A. Well, there was Clarence Derwent and he seemed to be a defense attorney and there was Jay Jostyn, and he was the district attorney, and they were polite to each other.

Q. Anybody else? A. There was John Ireland, and he looked worried because he was being tried for murder of some woman.

Q. What woman? A. It was either Joanne Dru or Sheila Bond, I just can't remember which.

Q. Why can't you remember which? A. Because they both are so good-looking and so well-dressed that nobody would want to kill them, and anyhow both of them were around somewhere at the end of the play.

Q. Then what was the play about? A. The D. A., Jostyn, said there was a murder and this lawyer, Derwent, dared him to prove it because there wasn't a corpus delicti.

A Slick Disposal

Q. A what? A. A corpus delicti—the kind of thing that fits well into well-fitting dresses, like Joanne Dru or Sheila Bond. If you don't have a corpus delicti, according to Mr. and Mrs. North, you ain't got a murder case worth a hoot in a hollow.

Q. Well, with everything including Dru and Bond stacked against him, how did the District Attorney make out? Did he win his case? A. Yes, and this fellow Ireland looked worrieder than ever when he got convicted, particularly when he seen—saw—the woman he was supposed to have killed right there in the courtroom.

Q. If there wasn't a corpus delicti, how was the conviction obtained? A. On scientific evidence. First there was a handwriting expert with a slide lecture on forgeries and then there was a dentist with a slide lecture on the Davis Crown.

Q. You mean Davis Cup, don't you? A. No, crown. It's a pivot cap on a tooth and this dentist found one in the grease trap of a bathtub and said it belonged to his patient. I think it was Miss Dru, but from where I sat I

"DEADFALL"

Play by Leonard Lee; staged by Michael Gordon; settings and lighting by Ralph Alswang; presented by Martin Goodman in association with Julius M. Gordon at the Holiday Theatre, October 27, 1955. The cast:

Harry Dietzler... Clarence Derwent
Judge Romagna... Harold Vermilyea
District Attorney McDonough...

Jay Jostyn
Clerk of the Court... Leslie Barrett
Billie Devine... Sheila Bond
Quentin Lockridge... Paul Huber
Jane Lockridge... Joanne Dru
Buck Carpenter... John Ireland
Detective-Lieutenant Martinez...

Norman Rose
Edmund Hartley... Mercer McLeod
Dr. Alexander Newman... Theo Goetz
Dr. Paul Stone... Sam Gray

thought she had a good set of teeth.

Q. And this Davis Crown in a grease trap is evidence of murder even if there isn't a corpus delicti? A. Yes, sir. How you do it is this: You put your stiff in a bathtub and boil her in nitrate of soda and sulphuric acid, and pretty soon everything is dissolved and you can flush her down the drain clean as a whistle. Everything, that is, except the tooth fillings.

Q. What did you say the name of this play was—"Dagnet"? A. No, sir. That's on television. This one is called "Deadfall" and it is being done by meat actors in a real theatre. You ought to see it some time, your honor, but you'd better be quick about it.



New York World-Telegram

The Sun

October 28, 1955

Joanne Dru, Ireland Open in 'Deadfall'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Joanne Dru and John Ireland, Mr. and Mrs., of movie fame, have chosen a backhanded way of making a joint appearance on Broadway.

Their vehicle is "Deadfall" at the Holiday. It is a courtroom thriller which seems chiefly devoted to keeping its stars off-stage or silent.

In the first of its two acts Mr. Ireland is on trial for the murder of a mysterious lady. In the testimony a



witness mentions a previous murder, for which he was acquitted. Then come the flashbacks.

Miss Dru was incapacitated with a spinal injury in Peru when her husband was killed. Ireland was tried for his murder and freed.

She Spins Web.

Now the widow plans her vengeance. Step by step we

watch her spin a web around Mr. Ireland, while she disguises herself as a fictitious lady of light virtue, and makes him fall in love with her.

Before he knows it, she has stacked every card against him. She even leaves gruesome traces of the disposal of her own body.

Then she disappears, re-assumes her true identity, and happily watches him sink into the clutches of the trap she has set.

This kind of thriller will not stand much analysis. You never know why Miss Dru is so sure Ireland killed her first husband, until late in the day, when he proudly confesses to her.

Not a Saving Grace.

By that time she is established as a vengeful little witch. And Ireland has not a saving grace to his character.

In the first act Miss Dru grinds her way around the stage in the most fetching of

costumes, fastidiously laying clues which will destroy Mr. Ireland. She is a lovely creature, even bent on execution. You feel any pace of hers is wasted that does not invoke a whistle.

Mr. Ireland growls and nibbles at Miss Dru in the first act. In the second he mainly listens to the other actors. Then just at the end he has a couple of furious, very quick outbursts. It is not much to go on.

Promise of Sunbeams.

Most of the lighter entertainment is supplied by Sheila Bond. She by now has established herself with local audiences as a sure promise of sunbeams and laughter.

Jay Jostyn and Clarence Derwent are the two attorneys, with not much bright to say. Norman Rose almost succeeds in making a character out of a plainclothes man. But the endless talk of the second act defeats him, as it does the other witnesses, eager and willing as they are.

The New York Times

October 28, 1955

The Theatre: Hedunit

'Deadfall,' a Melodrama by Leonard Lee, Bows

By BROOKS ATKINSON

THERE seemed to be something heavy about the atmosphere in the Holiday Theatre last evening. One critic slipped smoothly off into slumber during most of the first act. He had never looked so sweet, his tired face relaxed, no conscious cares troubling him.

Your correspondent's learned

companion kept dozing off, though he came to when poked and smiled weakly. He managed to stay awake by sitting up straight. Whenever he leaned back, that terrible weakness came over him again. These are shocking things to report but the evidence of eye-witnesses cannot be excluded from the record.

Meanwhile, Leonard Lee's melodrama, "Deadfall," was laboriously going through the motions of a play on the stage. Mr. Lee has a promising idea. A man who has committed murder escapes conviction

with the help of a clever lawyer. The widow of the man who was murdered then sets about convicting him of a murder that no one has committed. Succeeds, too.

As a writer, Mr. Lee is literal and ponderous. His play is choked with the tedious details of a court trial and some surprisingly tedious details of illicit amours and Hollywood assignations. Even the sins of the flesh do not provoke Mr. Lee into writing piquant dialogue. He is religiously committed to flat phrases and conversational platitudes.

Except for Clarence Derwent, the acting is equally lifeless. Mr. Derwent, former president of Actors Equity, currently president of ANTA [American National Theatre and Academy], a Shakespearean and a gentleman, plays

the part of the counsel for the defense, sworn to the orderly procedures of justice. What he has to say in the play is probably claptrap. But it seems brilliant and genteel when he speaks it with modesty and elegance, like a stage actor with a tradition.

Most of the acting is in the tradition of the cliché. Joanne Dru applies a routine movie technique to the part of the grieving widow. John Ireland's boulder and Sheila Bond's trollop are stock performances in different categories. Michael Gordon's direction is uninteresting, and the sets by Ralph Alswang are dull.

Purely as a matter of good form, people ought to try to stay awake in the theatre. But not all the responsibility rests with the audience. Authors should not write soporifics.

Daily Mirror

October 28, 1955

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Deadfall' Opens At Holiday Theatre

• Courtroom melodrama stiffly tells how widow frames husband's murderer.

The Holiday Theatre, an attractive house at 47th Street and Broadway, isn't exactly the most festive of places in which to spend an evening currently. For its new tenant, "Deadfall," is something of a stiff. And it has to do with one, too.

According to a program note, a deadfall, sez the American College Dictionary, is "a trap, esp. for large game." Well, what with doing some fancy eating recently in the Edison, Stamper's, Luchow's and the Vesuvio, we've put on a few pounds. But we've fallen

into less expensive traps than the one at the Holiday.

AFTER ALL, MARTIN Goodman, in association with Julius M. Gordon, has spent a pretty penny on Ralph Alswang settings and a "name" cast. Apparently, he's dished out the dough with a lavish hand, and we can only re-

gret that this likable, and usually shrewd, showman hasn't gotten more for his money this time out.

But Leonard Lee's "Deadfall" requires more than plush sets and good actors. It needs polish, better dialogue and better plotting. Since it hasn't these assets, it's just another fumbling, stumbling, courtroom melodrama. Without any measure of distinction, or even sufficient suspense, in its favor.

Lee tells of how a vengeful widow frames her husband's murderer. The court having acquitted the shady character, she determines to bring him to justice. If you are still interested, if you still want to know how she did it, you'll have to pay a visit to the Holiday Theatre. For it's against the rules of melodrama for us to tell you anything further.

Jay Jostyn, who has been Mr. District Attorney and Public Prosecutor on the air, impersonates with a sure hand the people of Los Angeles' advocate. And Clarence Derwent, a veteran be-

fore stage Bars, is a suave and persuasive counsel for the defense.

SHEILA BOND, WHO'S guaranteed to pep up the proceedings when she takes to the boards, is good as a breezy, brassy, eye-filling witness for the prosecution. While Harold Vermilyea presides over the Alswang courtroom with a proper judicial deadpan. Norman Rose is a different kind of detective from those we've usually seen on the stand. For some reason, he laughs right under the judge's nose. John Ireland, the stellar heavy of many a film, and his pretty wife, Joanne Dru, also famous on the silver screen, labor valiantly as the villain who gets his in the end, and the doughty, vindictive femme who brings it about.

"Deadfall" comes off as second-rate soap opera. We kept expecting an unctuous announcer to interrupt the action with a commercial and the inevitable station call letters. Sorry, Marty, better luck next time.

Herald Tribune

October 28, 1955

THEATER

'Deadfall'

By WALTER F. KERR

IT IS now customary in courtroom melodramas to hire anywhere from eight to fifteen extras and have them sit silently in a remote corner of the stage, listening. There they were again at "Deadfall" Thursday night—I counted nine in this particular group—with their eyes intent and their ears pricked up, attending avidly to every single word that was spoken. I can only say that they are, one and all, very great actors.

For Leonard Lee has written a suspense melodrama from which he has carefully, con-

scientiously, and with full consent of the will removed every last trace of suspense. His premise is pleasantly tricky: a woman whose husband has been murdered learns that his murderer has gone scot free, acquitted by the court. She thereupon adopts an alias, a red wig, and a low-down manner, strikes up an acquaintance with the blackguard she hates, and promptly frames him for her own murder. As I say, it's a good enough twist.

And I'm not really giving away anything. Mr. Lee has given it all away himself. Very early in

the evening he has his resourceful heroine pace the living room of a California apartment, twist her fingers in terrible woe, and announce precisely what she intends to do. ("Believe me, I have thought this out very carefully . . . one-half hour ago Buck Carpenter walked out of that courtroom a free man. But not for long, Quentin Lockridge. Not for long.")

Then she does it. (We are still in the first act.) We watch her slosh a little sulphuric acid around the bathroom, forge a check with the help of a pane of glass, rig up a couple of telephone calls by way of circumstantial evidence, and all this beaverish activity is interesting enough if you can stand the dialogue. ("Proof is what Linda Drake will get!" or "Be careful, he's a dangerous man," "I am a dangerous woman.")

We are now confronted with the second act. The entire second act is devoted to a pains-

taking, meticulous, marvelously thorough examination of all the manufactured evidence with which we are familiar. No twists, no red-herrings, no alternatives, no conceivably guilty butlers, no boomerangs, no surprises. By the time it is over we have learned quite a bit about the Davis crown—it's an easily detachable pivot tooth—and a great deal more about impossibly identical signatures. But we haven't learned a single new thing about the play since approximately 8:45, and all we can do—aside from sharing Defense Attorney Clarence Derwent's frequent and well-taken objections—is say "Well done, Linda," and hope the wicked fellow fries.

Director Michael Gordon has bestirred himself—overextended himself, really—to compensate for all this downhill drudgery by making each successive witness cuter than the last. Fidgety experts, pompous medical men,

"Deadfall"—continued

that sort of thing. But aside from Norman Rose's only slightly belligerent police inspector, it doesn't work; the evidence is as false as the tooth it rests on, and so are the characters who buzz and bumble around it.

John Ireland, one of the nominal stars of the piece, spends most the evening sitting beneath a great bronze symbol of California justice, clenching and unclenching his fists, and wondering why he doesn't have

many more lines than those extras. When he does get a brief opportunity to slouch around the booby-trapped living room, pouring a drink and lusting mightily for the wench who will do him in, he slouches, pours, and lusts agreeably enough.

Joanne Dru (in private life, Mrs. Ireland) is given a bit more to do. Most of this, however, consists in swiveling her shoulders, turning dramatically, hoisting her handsome head so that

it is on a photogenic line with her shoulders, and baring her lower teeth in a vindictive snarl. Miss Dru is good to look at, and she knows how to sit, stand, buff her nails, wave a cigarette, and enunciate. I did have the feeling, though, that every rhetorical pronouncement out of her had come from a soundtrack, and that the emotions had been dubbed.

Clarence Derwent's lawyer is something nearer a character-

ization (the author hasn't provided any, so Mr. Derwent is on his own), Sheila Bond's familiar brassiness is easy enough to take, and Jay Jostyn and Harold Vermilyea comport themselves responsibly. But "Deadfall's" pretty pretense that the audience was the jury and was free to leave the court during the proceedings seemed to me ominously symbolic.

New York Post

October 28, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Lady Who Framed a Murderer

Even failure can be difficult in the theater. It isn't easy to go wrong with a courtroom murder melodrama, but I'm afraid dramatist Leonard Lee achieves this dubious feat with his "Deadfall," a kind of poor man's "Witness for the Prosecution," which opened last night at the Holiday.

Although it has its occasional moments of proper suspense, Mr. Lee's dark tale of the law's blindness and a wronged woman's vengeance suffers gravely from some remarkably tedious trial testimony and the lack of even the minimum of credibility necessary in such works.

The author has started out with an entirely satisfactory idea of ironical retribution. A low and homicidal scoundrel has murdered a man and managed to persuade a gullible jury of his innocence. But the victim's beautiful and strong-minded widow isn't so

easily fooled. She is not only convinced that the fellow is guilty but is determined that he isn't to get off without proper punishment, and so she sets out to frame him. Thereupon, it isn't long before he is on trial for another murder, which is all of the story honor permits me to tell you.

Expert Testimony

But it isn't going beyond the bounds of critical ethics to say that most of "Deadfall" takes place in the courtroom where the scoundrel is being tried for that

second murder. Naturally, a lot of the play is concerned with the testimony of various witnesses, including the medical and handwriting experts, and it is axiomatic that these roles are always well played in the American theater. The axiom continues to hold true in Mr. Lee's melodrama, but, unfortunately, what the witnesses have to say is technical and detailed when it should also be dramatic.

Furthermore, I was never able to believe what was going on in either the courtroom or the apartment where the pretty lady was plotting her diabolical but sympathetic vengeance. Agatha Christie, to name the high priestess of mystery skulduggery, can tell you some fairly tall tales, but she has the skill to make you accept them. What Mr. Lee has to disclose is basically no wilder than what Miss Christie has been known to provide, but he hasn't the gift of conviction.

No Surprise

The unhappy outcome, so far as I can see, is that the framing of the scoundrel is far from cred-

ible. It is hard to believe that the law, blind and half-witted as it is shown to be, would have been taken in by the plot, or that the villain's unctuous lawyer wouldn't have managed to get him out of the trap. In addition, a good, guileful surprise is necessary at some climactic point, and I certainly didn't find this forthcoming. There is the final handicap that the heroine is missing for most of the second half and the villain just sits around.

No exception can be taken to the playing. Joanne Dru, a striking and handsome movie girl, makes her dramatic stage debut as the vengeful lady and manages the role well and interestingly. John Ireland is at least convincingly nasty as the trapped scoundrel. Sheila Bond as a sympathetic witness, Jay Jostyn and Clarence Derwent as the rival attorneys, Harold Vermilyea as the judge, and Norman Rose, Mercer McLeod, Theo Goetz and Sam Gray as the testifying experts are all that they should be. But "Deadfall" shows even courtroom melodramas can be dull.

Journal American

October 28, 1955

Very Slim Evidence For a Trick Mystery

But Critic Finds Much in Favor Of New Goodman Production

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE IS AN old understanding, lying around here some place, which provides that drama critics should not tell the plots of Whodunits in their reviews. But I am not going to pay any attention to this regulation, since I have not paid my dues to the Critics' Circle for 1955-56; I am going to tell you exactly what went on last night at the Holiday Theatre, where Joanne Dru and John Ireland opened in a new melodrama called "Deadfall," by Leonard Lee.

Well, sir, a fellow kills a non-existent character; that's for openers. You see, this man had really murdered

somebody else, the husband of a nice girl, and this made her so angry that she built up a case against him and got him tried and convicted for something he didn't do. They don't have a body, but the circumstantial case is so strong that the jury brings in a verdict of guilty.

It is, therefore, one of those trick mysteries which depends

on a multitude of gimmicks and falls back on the synthetic atmosphere of a courtroom to appear authentic. As an old hand around trials, and a member of the jury (as the play purports to regard the audience), I should have been forced to free the culprit and have the judge removed for incompetence. Where, in the annals of jurisprudence, has a man been convicted of murder without benefit of reasonable motive, habeas corpus, or some piece of evidence more damaging than a dental fixture that matched an X-ray in the mouth of a girl who wasn't there?

Be that as it may, there is

much to be said in favor of the production that Martin Goodman has given the festivities at the Holiday. There is an air of authority in the trial scenes; Clarence Derwent is a plausible attorney for the defense; Jay Jostyn is an eager and able District Attorney, and Sheila Bond is the eternal tootsie who always turns up in such situations. Ralph Alswang's sets are realistic and opulent.

But I was never made to feel anything about John Ireland, the defendant, Joanne Dru, the perpetrator or Paul Huber, her father. These major figures in the case emerged in such limited dimension that one didn't care who won, or why. And without some character delineation there is neither enough suspense nor surprise to carry the evening. A venture of this stripe could be saved by an enormously ingenious ending, a twist in plot similar to "Witness For the Prosecution"—but no such surprise is forthcoming in "Deadfall."

I'm afraid they're going to have trouble filling the jury for long.

"The Chalk Garden"



New York World-Telegram

and
The Sun

October 27, 1955

'The Chalk Garden' Opens at Barrymore

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Chalk Garden" is a disconcerting play. The new work of Enid Bagnold at the Ethel Barrymore Theater, has so much quality and such an interesting idea, one wishes it was more effectively stated in dramatic terms.

The structure of the play suggests that it depends on suspense for its interest. Yet the early lack of knowledge about the characters, and later revelations, are all incidental to endless impersonal, highflown observations about life.

The story line must be plucked out of background

mists. In general it concerns a quite horrible child, brought up by her grandmother, a crotchety old beauty whose life has been arid of affection.

The Play's Conflict.

The child is a pathological liar. The play's conflict lies in the efforts of a governess to restore the child to its mother, and normality.

The governess' concern is deep rooted because her own youthful reputation as a liar resulted in imprisonment.

Miss Bagnold has created an Alice-in-Wonderland world.

The trouble with it is that it lacks any normality for contrast. Since everyone is peculiar, peculiarity becomes average.

The play's literary style has much precious color in its thought and phrase. But the characters are asked to talk, as no human ever did in portentous proverbs.

And any inherent drama is shunned. Time and again, an evasive conversation leads right up to a crackling exposure, then is immediately interrupted.

Gladys Cooper returns to the local stage as the chilly-hearted grandmother. She turns in her toes, waves her arms and blusters in an effort to seem overbearing. Despite her beauty and acuteness, it all seems to betoken a consciousness that the play needs help from wherever it can get it.

Provocative Portrait.

Siobhan McKenna makes an interesting debut here as the governess. The Irish actress has beauty, and a sense of mystical detachment. Her voice sometimes lacks volume control, but she creates a provocative portrait of a woman long cut off from the world.

"THE CHALK GARDEN"

Play by Enid Bagnold; staged by Albert Marre; setting and costumes by Cecil Beaton; presented by Irene Mayer Selznick at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, October 26, 1955. The cast:

1st Applicant (Miss Madrigal)... Siobhan McKenna
Mattland... Fritz Weaver
2d Applicant... Georgia Harvey
Laurel... Betsy von Furstenberg
3d Applicant... Eva Leonard-Boyne
Mrs. St. Maugham... Gladys Cooper
Nurse... Marie Paxton
Olivia... Marian Seldes
The Judge... Percy Waram

Fritz Weaver comes closest to capturing the sense of Miss Bagnold's zany atmosphere. As a sensitive, jailbird, butler, he is extremely funny and very sympathetic.

Marian Seldes, as the child's maligned mother, and Percy Waram, as a judge, are the story's normal guideposts. Neither is enough in evidence, or given enough vital to say to create a true balance for the eccentrics.

As the child, Betsy von Furstenberg seems as much in need of a governess as Marilyn Monroe of a bib. She looks pretty ominous.

The New York Times

October 27, 1955

The Theatre: Sparkling Cut Glass

'Chalk Garden' Opens at Barrymore

By BROOKS ATKINSON

ENID BAGNOLD is "the lady of quality" who once wrote a novel from which S. N. Behrman wrote a drama of quality, "Serena Blandish." It was warmly admired by a few people in 1929.

The episode is recalled here because she has now written another drama of quality, "The Chalk Garden," which opened at the Ethel Barrymore last evening. It has been put together in the same off-center fashion, witty lines popping off at tangents, non-sequiturs rambling brightly through the dialogue, everything more or less upside down, nothing leading directly into the next point of the story.

Miss Bagnold gives the impression of being a severe writer with a sharp mind who disdains pencil, paper and all the materials of her craft, and has small patience with logic and what is known in the

trade as "the obligatory scene." "The Chalk Garden" is like a piece of sparkling cut glass. Fortunately, it is brilliantly acted by a gifted company headed by Gladys Cooper.

With one or two exceptions, only people of quality are permitted in the cast of characters. They are sufficiently upper class to be able comfortably to inhabit a rhapsodic setting by Cecil Beaton, operating for the moment in Sussex. The main problem seems to be to unmask the strangely omniscient young woman who accepts a post as governess of a horrible little girl. In the end she turns out to be sordidly fascinating, although it would not be fair to confide her particular folly to people who expect to see the play. Miss Bagnold is entitled to her professional secrets.

But the plot is the least interesting item in "The Chalk Garden." Miss Bagnold's eccentric manner is everything. Her acid portrait of a manor house is deadly—the overbearing mistress who talks glibly at cross purposes, the superannuated judge who says that

since he is very old and very learned he has no idea what he is going to do, the butler who has spent five years in jail and is very sensitive, the poisonous adolescent girl who likes to set fire to things, the governess without references who knows everything about gardening, the unseen old butler, bedridden and attended by a nurse upstairs, but still adamant about the management of the house.

In "The Chalk Garden" it is a sound rule not to pay much attention to Miss Bagnold when she is developing her story. But pay attention to the lines she throws away. A perverse writer, she squanders all her talent on the things that do not matter.

Although she has set the actors many problems, she ought to be grateful for the consistency with which they solve them. Albert Marre's direction neatly matches her stealthy way of telling a story. After a tedious absence from Broadway, Miss Cooper has returned with an extraordinarily vivacious performance. Her raffish old crone who darts

helter-skelter around the house, ruling everything by instinct, delivering apothegms by reflex action, showing no genuine emotion is immensely skillful and vastly entertaining.

The part of the enigmatic governess is played by a richly talented young Irish actress, Siobhan McKenna, who has a placid look that masks a fiery vitality. She has a habit of raising and lowering the volume of her speech that sounds progressively automatic and loses significance for that reason. But her characterization of a secretive, melancholy but intelligent and forceful woman is a vivid one.

There is a wonderful comic performance of the butler by Fritz Weaver, who is a genuine comedian in arms and shoulders as well as voice. Mr. Weaver is a superb actor. Betsy von Furstenberg plays the terrible child with a hiss in every smile. Percy Waram plays the worldly judge with droolery and distinction. In the colorless part of the girl's unfortunate mother, Marian Seldes is suitably detached and apprehensive.

"The Chalk Garden" is an odd, unyielding comedy by a witty writer with a highly personal style. There's a keen mind behind it, and one that is not intimidated by either the theatre or the world.

"The Chalk Garden"—continued

DAILY NEWS

October 27, 1955

'Chalk Garden' Fascinating Play With Excellent Cast, Sharp Wit

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Enid Bagnold's comedy, "The Chalk Garden," which opened last evening at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, is a tantalizing, fascinating and stimulating piece of theatre.

In it the beloved Gladys Cooper and the young Irish newcomer, Siobhan McKenna, are giving mettlesome performances, and play and players together offer an evening of superior intelligence and wit.

Miss Cooper is a grande dame who lives her imperious but slightly batty life in a fine manor house in Sussex. There are sundry others in her household, including a mixed-up 16-year-old granddaughter, a former butler now living somewhere upstairs as an invalid, and a current butler who has an overly romantic imagination. But Miss Cooper's only serious concern is her garden. She is a confirmed potterer, but things don't seem to grow well for her — and her grandchild

doesn't seem to behave well for her, either, being snippy and willful.

Mysterious Job-Hunter

In answer to an advertisement for a companion-tutor for the spoiled child comes Miss McKenna, a young woman with a gaunt face and eyes that seem always to be looking far away and into some mysterious past. This young woman prefers silence to speech, but when she does speak it is authoritative and to the point. The trouble with the garden, she discovers soon enough, is that it has not been treated correctly. It is chalk, or limestone, and needs a kind of nurture it has not been getting.

These two characters—and the fine actresses who play them — are intensely interesting as they reveal themselves on the Barrymore's stage. Miss Cooper, a beautiful woman, is a polished comedienne. She may be a garden-potterer, a bit of a flutter-head and sharp of tongue, but she also is sharp of wit. Here Miss Bagnold has written a life-size character and not a carelessly contrived caricature. Miss McKenna, whose serenity is unshakable, is profoundly disturbing as she seeks to conceal, by silence rather than denial, the facts of her recent life.

A Literate Play

"The Chalk Garden" is not a mystery play, nor is it heavily plotted—but even so I'd rather not tell you just who the odd young woman is. I'd rather ask you to share the excitement that

the granddaughter and the young butler feel when they begin to guess the truth, and to have you share the second-act curtain with Percy Waram, who plays a venerable judge, when the identity of Miss McKenna comes clear to him.

Miss Bagnold's play is an adroit, literate piece of craftsmanship. Whenever two of her people are together they strike sparks, and whatever they do or say has something to do with the comedy as a whole. Even the ancient, invalid butler, who is neither seen nor heard, has an odd influence upon events. And there is point to it all, for, like the chalk garden, the granddaughter has grown the way she is through faulty spiritual nurture.

Under Albert Marre's direction the company gives a spirited performance. Betsy von Furstenberg is excellent as the granddaughter, and Fritz Weaver's gently lunatic butler is a gem. Waram brings pith and wisdom to the wise and pithy role of the judge, and there are good minor performances by Georgia Harvey, Eva Leonard-Boyne, Marie Saxton, and a not-so-minor good one by Marian Seldes as the girl's mother. Cecil Beaton has designed a sunny and tasteful setting.

Journal  American

October 27, 1955

Gifted Cast In Adroit Play

Enlightened Language and Wit Provide a Rewarding Evening

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE IS A SCHOOL of British playwrighting which has its genesis in modulated and thoughtful talk, in which no strenuous action takes place, yet which is capable through adroit projection of giving the customers a rewarding evening in the theatre. "The Chalk Garden," the new Enid Bagnold play which Irene Mayer Selznick presented at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre last night is one of those.

A quarry of gifted players ease in and out of a Cecil Beaton room in a Sussex Manor house, talking interminably, making their vagrant and oblique observations on life.

Their talk is witty and sometimes profound; their behavior, if not orthodox, is constantly arresting, we find ourselves caught up with their problems, their whims, their destinies.

All this is a far cry from the popular formulae of the era; nothing overpoweringly big happens.

Right Ingredients

A young woman applies for the position of governess in what appears to be an affluent and pedestrian country household. Then, in slow progression, we learn that the granddaughter is a strenuous psycho, her mother is rather elaborately launched in a second marriage, the grandmother is involved in a strange conflict between the garden and her complicated grand-daughter, the youthful butler is a mixed-up crazy kid, and the entire premises are dominated by a retired manservant who lies in an upstairs bed and gives orders over the phone. Then, of course, we discover that the new young woman is herself recently released from fifteen years in jail on a murder rap.

Well, nobody can possibly claim that the ingredients for drama are missing from this line-up. The amazing, and rather ingenious fact is that it doesn't go anywhere; the new governess succeeds in regenerating the grand-daughter to a degree, the elderly retainer comes to a peaceful end, and we leave the grandmother alone with her new employee, listening to her expert advice on how to raise flowers in her chalk-ridden garden.

This is somehow quite sooth-

ing. We have spent a couple of hours with these provocative people, and now it is time to go home. We make a mental note to call up in a year or so and see how they're getting on; has the new governess strangled the old lady, or have they joined forces to produce a prize rhododendron?

Making her debut in America is Siobhan (pronounced "she-vaun") McKenna, in the role of the domestic. She is a spirited and highly capable young lady of Irish extraction and if she seemed to be overstrident at times last night I'm sure it can be attributed to the nervousness of the occasion. Gladys Cooper is, as ever, immaculate in the role of the fey and fetching grandmother; and Betsy von Furstenberg is decorative and suitably off-center as the granddaughter.

Other notable contributions are offered by Percy Waram, Fritz Weaver, and Marian Seldes.

This is not the usual fare to attract large and impatient American audiences, but I, for one, was content to sit back and enjoy this emotional flow in a quiet countryside. The auspices are attractive, the language is enlightened, and I had a good time.

New York Post

October 27, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr. A Play With a Symbolic Garden

It was my disturbing impression at the Ethel Barrymore Theater last night, where "The Chalk Garden" was having its first performance, that Enid Bagnold, its author, had perhaps written the wrong play. She introduced some odd and interesting characters, provided them with a pro-

vocative situation, revealed signs of an original sense of humor and demonstrated that she is the possessor of a graceful and intelligent prose style, but it seemed to me that the resulting drama, despite several striking performances, rarely came to life in the fashion it kept hopefully suggesting.

To begin with, Miss Bagnold brought to an attractive manor house in Sussex a trio of eccentric applicants for a household job. The job, it turned out, was to look after a willful girl who set fire to things and claimed she had been raped at the age of 12, and it went to an enigmatic and

reticent young woman who knew all about gardens and had a mysterious and probably dubious past. Could it have been that she had spent some time in prison and had been accused of murdering someone? This possibility appealed to the wistful acting butler who had been jailed once himself.

Nor was this the extent of the playwright's fairly unusual cast of characters. The grandmother, who presided over the manor house, was a slightly scatterbrained type, who was pleased with her unpopularity in the village. There was also the child's mother, who dropped in from

time to time to try persuading her hostile daughter to go away with her. Then there was the judge who came for lunch and remembered a young woman who had talked back to him when he had sentenced her for murder. Finally, there was the old butler who was busily dying offstage.

Since Miss Bagnold seemed to regard all of these collected oddities with freshness of humor and to write about them with amused appreciation, I thought it appeared likely that she was going to offer us an entertainingly mad comedy concerning their curious interrelationships. And there was every indication that she had just the proper style for it. But it wasn't long before it became evident that she was up to more serious matters. There was, for instance, that garden, which, it proved, was made of chalk and was highly symbolic.

It was this symbolism, it seemed to me, that got in her way. As long as she was writing about her portrait gallery of eccentrics, particularly her engaging pair of ex-jailbirds, she was in admirable form. But the symbol of the garden kept coming up.

The grandmother was trying to raise things in it that wouldn't grow there, and this, it was indicated to us, was symbolic of the attempt to raise the imaginative and spoiled child in the wrong surroundings. Instead of adding point to the play, it resulted in a stubborn refusal of the narrative to remain properly alive.

Although "The Chalk Garden" gave opportunities to such fine players as Gladys Cooper and Percy Waram to offer excellent portrayals of the grandmother and the judge, it was Siobhan McKenna, the young Irish actress whose St. Joan caused so much recent enthusiasm in London, who provided the most interesting performance as the woman of mystery. Miss McKenna is the sort of arresting performer who gets everything out of a role and hints at limitless potentialities. She is decidedly worth seeing. The daughter is played by Betsy von Furstenberg in her now familiar style, and Fritz Weaver is particularly good as the acting butler. The characterizations are more interesting than the symbolism.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 27, 1955

THEATER

'The Chalk Garden'

By WALTER F. KERR

THE dramatist who would convey one of the essential secrets of her play by having two of her characters sit down in the second act and simply ask one another twenty questions is quite a daring one. The dramatist who can, while engaging in this pretty game, make us all lean forward and hang suspended on every curious word must be a very good one.

I say "must be" because the new play that Enid Bagnold has sent into the Ethel Barrymore is a baffling one—baffling on quite a few counts. "The Chalk Garden" takes place in an English manor house populated by a curious brood. There is grandmother Maugham (Gladys Cooper) to come in from her pruning and cheerfully announce that her odd little granddaughter with the long yellow hair has been thoughtlessly violated in a public park at the age of twelve.

There is the granddaughter (Betsy von Furstenberg) to curl her bare feet up in a Cecil Beaton armchair and explain

that one reason she likes to set fire to things is because her father once committed suicide in her presence. (This, I hasten to add, is a lie.) There are, in addition, an unseen butler in an upper-room who rules the household from a sickbed, an extremely present man servant who pouts and throws his hands heavenward because he cannot stand criticism, and an anonymous newcomer—a prim, pale wraith in a porkpie hat—who is willing to stay on as governess if she is permitted to rearrange the garden.

Miss Bagnold is not in a hurry to relate these suave and confident freaks—"I find her wonderfully odd," says one of them about another—or to direct their movement into any foreseeable dramatic pattern. We watch the governess (Siobhan McKenna) tame the granddaughter by softly calling her every alarming bluff. We watch the child's remarried mother try to carry her off, only to be frustrated by a violent and apparently senseless tirade from

grandma. Most of all we watch the governess herself; little by little we pick up tiny intimations that this very wise and very able woman has been convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

Gleams of some kind of truth flash back and forth across the stage somewhere between the words that are spoken and the glances that are evaded. Tea goes on being served, flowers go on being transplanted, the conversation grows brighter and brighter. Spurts of wild humor cascade without warning over the darkening landscape; epigrams that would do credit to Ivy Compton-Burnett leap unpredictably out of sober, even savage, clashes. Whatever is being communicated is communicated elliptically, around psychological corners, with the impulsiveness of thunderbolts out of clear blue skies. It is as though Miss Bagnold had wanted to dramatize what one of her characters calls "the shape and shadow of life, with the accidents of truth taken out." Truth is an accident, and cannot be discovered until eleven o'clock.

But what is truly baffling about the work at the Barrymore is that, out of all that is circuitous and eccentric and delightfully left-field, something very real is communicated. At the last the defiant picture slips

gently, almost imperceptibly, into focus: this particular world rests on a soil of chalk, and nothing can grow in it; only someone who has brushed death and earned detachment can penetrate the underbrush of daily living, weed out the simple facts, and save a couple of souls.

It should be obvious enough that Miss Bagnold has not written a play, or used a method, that is likely to have vast popular appeal. She has done one thing, though: she has had a vision of what a very fresh and personal kind of play could be like and she has seen it through with wit, literacy, and an almost unearthly integrity. A special taste, no doubt; but, on its level and of its kind, extraordinarily tasty.

The company performs brilliantly. Gladys Cooper slams her feet to the floor and bounds from a chair with the authority of a martinet and the winning irrelevance of an eternal chatterbox. Siobhan McKenna sets her faraway eyes on a corner of the future and speaks with simple, stunning honesty. Betsy von Furstenberg is bewitching as the child who imagines herself the reincarnation of Hamlet, and Fritz Weaver, Percy Waram, Eva Leonard-Boyle, and Marian Seldes have all caught the precise, curious accents needed to do honor to a precise, curious talent.

"The Chalk Garden"—continued

Daily Mirror

October 27, 1955

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'The Chalk Garden' A Comedy of Quality

• Provocative and stimulating, it has some profound things to say.

In "The Chalk Garden," which Irene Mayer Selznick brought to the Ethel Barrymore Theatre Wednesday evening, Enid Bagnold has penned a sensitive and literate high comedy. It is a play of fantasy, symbolism and reality. It makes demands from its patrons, but should prove rewarding to those willing to meet them.

Miss Bagnold tells of a worldly woman who has turned her imaginative granddaughter into an impish, spoiled extrovert. She engages a companion for the teenager, a woman who has been tried for murder, and succeeds in preparing the flamboyant youngster

to face life and go with a practical mother who has neglected the girl but now wants her.

THE MATRIARCH is a knowing, salty old girl who dotes on excitement. She buys flowers to stick in a garden that won't grow

them, a chalky, sterile garden. But in the end, there is a promise that both the garden and the granddaughter, the latter "like a piece of porcelain on a shelf, a little cracked but the best," will bloom.

Miss Bagnold weighs illusion and truth, evasion and the factual. She does so with humor and warmth, with understanding and compassion. Though most of her characters are eccentrics, living in a sort of dream world, they are credible and fascinating. Their speech is frothy on the surface, yet freighted with meaning.

Albert Marre's direction has caught the charm and the heart-break of this unusual, moody piece. Gladys Cooper, grand trouper that she is, gives a triumphant impersonation of the brittle, seemingly scatter-brained yet thoughtful mistress of the manor. A relic of the past who can accept the future gracefully.

SIOBHAN McKENNA is highly effective as the companion who has learned much in prison solitude, whose guilt or innocence is

never established, though her vocal transitions are often abrupt and somewhat strident. Fritz Weaver is amusing as a temperamental man-of-all-work, who has served five years as a conscientious objector.

Betsy Von Furstenberg is quite right as the granddaughter with a penchant for doing the startling. The ever-reliable Percy Waram is likable as a judge who puts the law before heart. Marian Seldes is good as the mother who has matured, and feels she is now ready to guide her errant offspring. And there is a delightful, but too brief, contribution by Eva Leonard-Boyne, as a critical applicant for a job.

"The Chalk Garden" is a play of quality. Provocative and stimulating. You'll get as much from it as you bring to it. We think its appeal special and limited, and that's too bad, for there are a few of us who will remember it fondly. It has some profound things to say beneath its surface glitter.

"Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme"

New York Post

October 26, 1955.

By Richard Watts Jr.

Arrival of the Comedie Francaise

The first appearance in America of France's great and historic theatrical company, the Comedie Francaise, which took place last night at the Broadway Theater, is clearly a cultural event of international importance, and I think we would all have been aware of that fact even without the preliminary speechmaking in front of the curtain. Naturally, though, there had to be those speeches of congratulation to make it official, including the reading of a scroll signed by Mayor Wagner which contained a sentence that sounded to me long enough to have been ghostwritten by William Faulkner.

It was right and fitting that the opening performance should have been of Moliere's "Bourgeois Gentilhomme." Not only is Moliere the classic genius in the illustrious annals of the company, but the famous comedy is the work of his with which Americans must certainly be most familiar and most at home. Even those of us who may be otherwise fairly vague about the achievements of France's most celebrated comic dramatist will remember about his M. Jourdain, who discovered to his surprise

and delight that he had been speaking prose for 40 years.

You are, of course, sitting in the presence of history, not only cultural but political, when you're watching the Comedie Francaise, which is considerably older than the United States. Since 1680, when it was founded under the regime of Louis XIV, and the tumultuous chronicles of France have gone side by side through the days of Kings, Emperors, republics, revolutions, wars and occasional periods of peace. It is all so impressive as a triumphant example of national continuity that it's a little difficult not to be slightly awed if you have even a slight sense of history.

Let me say immediately, however, that the historic burden they bear doesn't make the visiting players pretentious or pe-

dantic. Never having seen the Comedie Francaise in action before, I was pleasantly surprised to find its work far less stylized than I had anticipated. The actors aren't afraid of visual gags or comic mugging or even an occasional touch of slapstick. And they are certainly not given to stateliness, despite their skill at wearing handsome 17th-century costumes and wigs.

They also possess a first-rate character comedian in the person of Louis Seigner, who plays M. Jourdain, the would-be gentleman. M. Seigner, who isn't afraid to make faces and indulge in strange outcries when the occasion demands, is not only a funny fellow but a likable and appealing performer, and you can sympathize with his put-upon M. Jourdain while you're laughing at him. In addition, I thought there were moments when he looked in profile a little like our own Bert Lahr, which is no disadvantage to any comedian.

Of the players in the supporting roles, I found most pleasure last night in the work of Georges Chamarat, who is the pedant responsible for M. Jourdain's discovery that he has been speaking prose and Michel Galabru, who appears as the comically fearsome fencing master bent on teaching the would-be gentleman duelling. Of the women in the

"LE BOURGEOIS GENTILHOMME"

Comedy-ballet by Moliere; with music by Lulli; staged by Jean Meyer; divertissement arranged by Leone Mail; decor and costumes by Suzanne Lalique; performed by The Comedie Francaise under the auspices of S. Hurok at the Broadway Theatre, October 25, 1955.

The cast:

Dorante.....Maurice Escande
Covielle.....Jean Meyer
Monsieur Jourdain...Louis Seigner
Dancing Instructor...Jacques Charon
Music Instructor...Robert Manuel
Philosophy Instructor.....

Georges Chamarat

Cleonte.....Jean Piat
Apprentice Tailor....Teddy Bills
Master Tailor...Jean-Louis Jemma
Fencing Master...Michel Galabru
A Lackey.....Jacques Toja
A Lackey.....Arsene Drancourt
Nicole.....Beatrice Bretty
Mme. Jourdain...Germaine Rouer
Lucile.....Micheline Boudet
Dorimene.....Marie Sabouret

cast, Beatrice Bretty, the company soubrette, has the best role, and, if you're interested in such matters, Marie Sabouret seems to be the beauty of the troupe. The Comedie Francaise players are welcome visitors.

"Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme"—continued

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

October 26, 1955

THEATER

'Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme'

By WALTER F. KERR

IN MOLIERE'S "Bourgeois Gentilhomme," with which the Comedie Francaise introduced itself to America Tuesday evening, Louis Seigner puts on the gaudy feathers, the gaily colored dressing gowns, and the gloriously defective grand manners of our bld social-climbing friend, Monsieur Jourdain. The way in which M. Seigner teaches himself—and the rest of us—to believe in the role seems to me to summarize quite precisely the work, and the function, of the company as a whole.

M. Jourdain is very easily made into a buffoon. Moliere created him for a random court extravaganza, meant him to bumble his way through an assortment of satirical sketches and opulent ballets, never did bother to tie him into the kind of coherent narrative that gives "Tartuffe" its meaning and makes it a masterpiece. The door to burlesque is wide open every step of the way.

This fine actor never so much as puts a finger on the knob. Leaving free-hand caricature to professional clowns, he turns to stare at this foolish, fashion-struck merchant with a realistic eye, liking him—and lamenting him—for the ordinary, well-meaning, hard-working, thick-headed citizen he is. When M. Jourdain sails into a dancing lesson and lifts a lame foot with the grace of a clod, he is not in this production—merely inept. He has been practicing daily, putting his idiot mind to it, taking the whole thing seriously; he is conscientiously inept. When he discovers that he must make a choice between writing verse and prose, he breathes heavily, twists his fingers in profound concern, and worries about his decision. The sequence isn't just a gag; it's a soul-struggle.

What the Comedie Francaise is clearly prepared to bring to

its enormous repertory in soundness, and soundness turns out to be a virtue. If M. Seigner is giving what might be described as a central performance—a performance that respects what is in the part rather than what may be made out of it—the troupe as a unit is firmly dedicated to steering a hard, straight course into the heart of the material. (Some of France's most extravagant stylists have begun their work at the Comedie; as they become extravagant, or even as they become stylists, they tend to splinter off and form their own companies; the Comedie remains).

All of this, I suppose, is what is meant by "tradition." But the term sounds a great deal stiffer, and a lot less straightforward, than the sane, beautifully-grounded readings now going forth at the Broadway. Experimental mountings of classics can be more colorful and more inventive than Jean Meyer's mounting of the "Gentleman"; their very boldness translates more easily than the hard-core common sense that the Comedie clings to. But a permanent national company of this sort does something more than keep the plays alive; it keeps their essential values intact.

And it performs its mission without loss of theatrical gay-

ety. The decor that Suzanne Lallique has imagined for the opening bill is dazzling; inside towering white walls a gold-and-gray staircase curves in solemn, but suggestively satiric, splendor. Mme. Lallique's costumes are stunning, too; and the actors wear them—tumbling wigs, flowering cuffs, oversize jabots and all—as though they were reasonable, eminently comfortable, clothes.

There is a handsome, confident grasp of Moliere's malicious vision of mankind of all sides: to watch Michel Galabru hurl himself onto the stage in the very brief role of an explosive fencing master is to realize that every nook and cranny of a resilient farce is going to be honorably explored. Georges Chamarat's stringy scarecrow of a philosophy instructor, Beatrice Bretty's wheezing mountain of a housemaid, Germaine Rouer's level-headed Mme. Jourdain, Jean Meyer's casually impudent man-servant—all are shrewdly tooled, perfectly polished images.

The performance is long. The original Lull music is a bit sleepy for contemporary ears. But this is, in a way, the theater's anchor, and it is indispensable.



New York World-Telegram

and
The Sun

October 26, 1955

Moliere Bows In, Fresh as a Daisy

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

History was made last night when the Comedie Francaise played in this country for the first time in its long history.

You might say, too, that with Moliere's "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" at the Broadway Theater, Manhattan was enjoying the novelty of a play which has had a 275-year out-of-town tryout.



The comedy of "The Would-Be Gentleman" has been a standby in the great French theater's repertory since it began. Even now it is exquisitely presented with remarkable spontaneity and affection.

Out of Date, Eh?

Considered solely as source material, the play is startling in that it shows how little our ideas of comedy have altered in nearly three centuries. Society, if it exists at all nowadays, is certainly not as rigid as it was in Moliere's time. But the emo-

tions and tricks of a climber remain very much the same.

The loves and lives of the play's personnel are untangled through an elaborate disguise, in a Turkish masque. If you think it unconvincing or outdated, look around you and see how often a beard or wig deceives someone for comic effect on television or the stage.

The brilliant company speaks so clearly, and the language of Moliere is so direct, that the French can be understood by a school child. The pace of speech may be slowed down a bit by the visitors, but that is all to the good. And the flourishing style of acting serves constantly to illustrate what is going on.

Color and Symmetry.

The production is beautiful. The set, for all its gallery and circular staircase, is a simple, open cube, a lovely gold and white frame for the actors.

The costumes are conceived in a pattern of coherent color, and the play's action often has a symmetry that we know only in musi-

cals. It is worth noting, too, that the lighting is invaluable for comedy, since it reveals facial expressions.

Often supporting the action, now and then halting it for diversion, is the gentle music of Lull and some brittle, touching little ballets.

The People in It.

The comedy of course is dominated by Louis Seigner as Jourdain, the rich man who thinks acting like a swell will make him a true aristocrat. He is rather like a good-natured hippopotamus, as he gleefully, doggedly learns his lessons, and never knows when he is beaten.

Maurice Escande makes a fiery lover for the daughter, and Georges Chamarat is a dry instructor of the difference between prose and poetry.

Marie Sabouret is dazzling as the Marquise our snob would woo, and Beatrice Bretty impresses lastingly with her first bursts of hooting laughter at her employers' fancy clothes.

"Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme"—continued

Daily Mirror

October 26, 1955

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

Comedie Francaise A Brilliant Company

• Moliere's 'Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme' is first offering of famed troupe.

Two hundred and seventy-five years ago, Louis XIV merged two acting companies, one of which had been organized by Moliere, into what is now known as the Comedie Francaise. It was but fitting, therefore, that this French national theatre, paying its first visit to America, should launch its New York season with Moliere's "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme."

Moliere delights in exposing the pompous and pretentious, the vain, mean and fraudulent. And he was at his best in this satire on the wealthy bourgeois who would be a gentleman. Who engaged dancing, music, fencing and philosophy instructors because men of fashion and moment did so.

NOT ONLY did he make a fool of himself with these pretensions to culture, but he became equally ridiculous in his courtship of a marquise. Duped and swindled by sycophants, he finally awakened to the facts of life, and permitted his pretty daughter to marry the man of her choice.

Under the direction of Jean Meyer, the distinguished visitors played the comedy in fine style at the Broadway Theatre Tuesday evening. Their diction was admirable, indeed. The ensembles were skilfully arranged and most effective. The acting was just right, emphatic when necessary but never overdone.

Louis Seigner, a robust man with a beaming moon face, was a wonderful M. Jourdain. He brought out all the foolishness of the ambitious tradesman with ingratiating relish. We particularly liked his scene with Georges Chamarat, in which he discovers that he has been speaking prose all his life.

BEATRICE BRETTE was quite fetching as a lusty maid, not averse to laughing out loud at her master's follies. Charming Micheline Boulet and handsome Jean Piat were excellent as the romantics. Salutes are also due Marie Sabouret, Germaine Rouer, Michel Galabru and Maurice Escande.

Leone Mail has choreographed divertissements to music by Lullu, while Suzanne Lallique has designed stunning

decor. A living room, in white with gray and gold trim, is one of the smartest settings we've seen on the stage in many a semester.

Our thanks must go to S. Hurok for bringing the Comedie Francaise to Manhattan. The advent of this brilliant company is one of the rare events of this or any season. And may we extend a warm welcome to the accomplished and gracious visitors. Custodians of a lengthy and great tradition.

OF COURSE, the Comedie Francaise performances are being given in French. Which is as it should be. However, your knowledge of the language does not have to be commanding for you to enjoy them. And there is an intelligent synopsis in the program for those who have no facility in French.

You may never have the opportunity again to see this eminent acting company, so we urge you to take advantage of this chance. There will be three changes of bill during the limited engagement.

Journal American

October 26, 1955

Expert French Cast In Resplendent Bow

Famed Paris Institution Gives
Fine Portrayal of Moliere Play

By JOHN McCLAIN

LAST NIGHT was a luminous occasion in the neighborhood of Broadway and 53d st., for it marked the first appearance in America of the Comedie Francaise, the gifted and resplendent institution which has been a fixture in Paris for a couple of centuries.

There was a glittering bilingual audience on hand, Commissioner Patterson, representing Mayor Wagner, presented a scroll and the orchestra played "The Marseillais" and "The Star Spangled Banner." Then the company came onstage and gave a charming performance of "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" (The Would-Be Gentleman) by Moliere.

This is a preponderously purist version of the classic, relying mostly on the original play on words for humor, and hence offering rather meagre fare to one who is not prepared to dedicate himself to a serious excursion into the language.

Well Contrived

But for those to whom this offers no challenge it is cer-

tainly a memorable experience. The entire production is wonderfully well contrived, the players are first-rate throughout, and for anyone with a comfortable knowledge of the tongue and idiom it should be like settling down to the re-enjoyment of an old friend, much as many of us return to Gilbert and Sullivan.

"The Would-Be Gentleman" is an ambitious and protracted effort, none-the-less. There are songs and a spot of ballet here and there, and one of the most basic yet involved plots this side of soap opera. The son of a rich merchant decides that all this business about being born to the purple is so much nonsense; what's there about a gentleman that can't be learned from the right people in ten easy lessons?

So he engages the proper teachers, all of whom thrive on his largesse, and launches himself on a course of instruction

that will make him eligible for the affections of a Marquise who has captured his ambitious eye.

Familiar Plot

All of us are familiar with this plot, which has since been worked over by Scott Fitzgerald and others, but at least there is the sense here that this is the original. It may not be a very popular theory at the moment, but the conclusion is that gentlemen are bred, and not released from an assembly line.

In the expert cast Louis Seigner is ludicrous and yet strangely sympathetic as Monsieur Jourdain, bourgeois; Maurice Escande is properly overbearing as Count Dorante, the symbol of aristocracy; Germaine Rouer is equally assured in the role of the knowledgeable wife of Jourdain; and Marie Sabouret is a snooty and desirable Marquise.

The supporting cast is enormous and infinitely accomplished. Mme. Lallique has devised simple sets which give an impression of scope and opulence, and costumes which are equally practical.

It seems odd that the Comedie Francaise has waited so long to pay us a visit, but there seems little doubt that their first trip will be a financial and cultural success.

"Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme"—continued

DAILY NEWS

October 26, 1955

Comedie Francaise Starts With Deft and Amusing 'Gentilhomme'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The Comedie Francaise, a gifted and polished company of comedians whose organization and tradition date back to Louis XIV and Moliere, made its first New York appearance at the Broadway Theatre last evening, and it was an event of social and political, as well as theatrical, importance.

After suitable speeches by suitable dignitaries, including Commissioner Richard Patterson and Robert W. Dowling, the company got down to performing Moliere's "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme"—an obvious and perfect choice for the introductory bill of a short repertory season. The performance was a joyful one, witty, funny, charming and slick. The costumes,

by Mme. Suzanne Lallique, were creations of splendor and beauty, and they were played against a dramatically simple setting—also by Mme. Lallique—consisting of a tall, white, balconied room with an ornate spiral stair winding to the balcony.

Artful Comedian

Louis Seigner, who plays the bourgeois, is a fascinating actor.

He looks a little like Bert Lahr and occasionally performs like Bert. But this would-be gentleman of Seigner's is not merely a buffoon, given to ridiculous posturings and outlandish lessons in music, fencing and correct speech. He is, as a truly comic character should be, a very serious fellow, and his yearning to become one of "les gens de qualite" evokes from the playgoer an underlying sentiment of sympathy. Seigner's performance is an extremely detailed contrivance, employing all the skills and artifices of the truly accomplished actor.

And a Fine Company

The whole company, of course,

is accomplished, and last evening there were a number of entertaining performances. These fine players included Georges Chamarat as the philosophy instructor, Michael Galabru as the perfect fencing master, Beatrice Bretty as a heartily scoffing servant and Germaine Rouer as the would-be gentleman's hard-headed wife. Jean Piat and Jean Meyer were delightful as a pair of practical-joking plotters, and through the comedy ran some pleasant incidents of music and ballet—for ballet was a part of "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" from its beginning.

As I sat watching last evening's happy performance I got to thinking of my friend Bobby Clark. A few years ago Bobby did a splendid, stylish and hilarious "Would-Be Gentleman," but some of his reviewers accused him of tampering with a classic and hoking-up Moliere. I felt at the time that he had done no such thing—and last evening I was sure I was right. If Bobby Clark would just learn French he would fit right into the Comedie Francaise at least in "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme."

The New York Times

October 26, 1955

Theatre: Comedie Francaise Bows

Moliere Play Given by Group in U.S. Opening

By HERBERT L. MATTHEWS

WE waited 275 years for the Comedie Francaise to come to us, which made it a great and joyous occasion last night to see a scintillating performance of Moliere's "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" (The Would-Be Gentleman). It was a happy stroke of genius to choose this gay and witty play for the opening of the series, in which we are to see four more classical comedies over the next four weeks.

Everything seemed great last night. Moliere's is the greatest name in French literature, in fact the greatest anywhere in social comedy. The Comedie Francaise is the greatest of French companies. And last night there was enough enchantment to make us believe that "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" was the greatest of comedies.

In reality, there are better plays by Moliere, but none that shows the company off

in a happier light. The story is a simple one of the draper's son who wanted to be a nobleman, who is cheated and bilked by everyone, who makes an utter fool of himself, drives his family almost insane and at the end is just his foolish self, while all the others are happy in their sensibleness. The play would not be alive nearly three centuries after it was written if Moliere had not worked from the closest observation of life, making real life funny and ridiculous and gay, with just a touch of the pitiful. He created some unforgettable, eternal characters and one such was Monsieur Jourdain, the bourgeois gentleman.

Louis Seigner performs the miracle of making Monsieur Jourdain, for all his vanity, snobbishness, pettiness and fatuousness, into a sympathetic character. The watchers laughed without malice, which is the way it should be. One could almost feel the audience gathering its risibilities for that most famous of lines, when Monsieur Jourdain learns to his supreme delight that for forty years "I was

speaking prose without knowing it."

It is all laughter, and Beatrice Bretty, perhaps the most famous of the actors and actresses who have come to New York, playing the servant, Nicole, set the note of the evening with her infectious hilarity. For those who know the French classical theatre there is something stereotyped about the acting. The devotee demands a style, and he enjoys the subtleties of the slight variations the actors introduce. The American, who for the most part is seeing the play for the first time, can let himself go and revel in the gaiety and surprises, and in watching a wonderfully trained company perform.

It seems almost unfair to pick out special names in a company that does not allow stars and that trains its actors to such perfection. Jean Meyer, who directed the play and also acted the part of Covielle, comes to us with a great reputation that seems to have been well earned. Another of the younger men, Jacques Charon, playing the

part of the dancing instructor, also has been preceded by some fame as a comic with nimble dancing feet. Germaine Rouer, as the sensible, matter-of-fact Mme. Jourdain, is another of the older members of the company who plays with wonderful assurance. Micheline Boudet as Lucile and the stunning Marie Sabouret as Dorimene were delightfully suitable to their parts.

It was not just hospitality that inclined everyone to enthusiasm last night. The one set—a bright, open room with a circular staircase leading to an upper floor, and everything in white, gray and gold—was as attractive as it was suitable. The costumes were beautiful, and for that and the decor Mme. Suzanne Lallique is to be thanked. Jean-Baptiste Lully, one of the most charming of seventeenth-century composers, wrote the music especially for his friend Moliere, and the company's own director at the moment, Andre Cadou, led the orchestra.

So there were three cheers all around, and not least for Sol Hurok, who performed his own miracle in bringing the Comedie Francaise to New York. "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" is to play until Nov. 7, when "Le Barbier de Seville" and "Arlequin Poli Par l'Amour" (Love Teaches Harlequin) are to be given.

"The Desk Set"

Daily Mirror

October 25, 1955

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

Shirley Booth Great In 'The Desk Set'

• Comedy is lightweight, but Miss Booth's performance will make it a hit.

The great Shirley Booth checked into the Broadhurst Theatre Monday evening, and all's right with the world in W. 44th St. She arrived in a featherweight comedy by William Marchant called "The Desk Set." But it has a terrific role in it for our Shirley, and that's all the Booth fans want for their favorite.

Miss Booth is currently the head of the reference department of a radio and TV network. A whiz with facts, figures and the poets. Just the one to stump Clifton Fadiman and "Information Please" at the drop of a hat. The desk set are her pals and subordinates in the research foundry.

THE GALS are getting along okay until a methods engineer—efficiency expert to you—starts installing "Emmys," or mechanical brains, around the premises. The first, in the Payroll Department, promptly goes berserk and fires everybody in the joint, including the president.

But you and I know that Miss Booth confounds the monster, teaches the boss's nephew that there's still a future for people and eventually garners a proposal of marriage from a vice president who has mastered delaying tactics from Fabius. Thus proving again that this is the best of all possible worlds for the star and her legions of admirers.

"The Desk Set" is so light that a good stiff breeze could easily blow it off the Broadhurst stage. If the diminutive but mighty Shirley weren't around to keep it moored firmly to the boards.

Her performance is a joy to see. She rings the changes.

THERE IS THE inevitable drunk scene at an office Christmas party. It could have been just another one of those things, but, in Miss Booth's skillful hands, it's hilarious. And when she matches wits with junior and his masterpiece of automation, the first-nighters rocked, rolled and roared. You couldn't hear many of the punch lines for the howls.

Clarice Blackburn, Dorothy Blackburn and Anne-Marie Gayer are just right as Shirley's bright associates. Frank Milan is likable as the procrastinating VIP with the customary ulcers, as is Byron Sanders as the well-meaning—though less than practical—proponent of the machine age.

Joyce Van Patten is amusing as a sexy secretary. Mary Gildea is up to her old scene-stealing tricks as a nondescript habituee of the book stacks. And salutes are due Frank Roberts, Harry Ellerbe, Louis Gossett, Elizabeth Wilson, Doris Roberts, Wayne Carson, Sterling Jensen and Mike Steen.

JOSEPH FIELDS has staged the charade for more than it's worth, while George Jenkins has designed a fascinating set. We still wonder why Marchant, Fields and producers Robert Fryer and Lawrence Carr couldn't have

"THE DESK SET"

Comedy by William Marchant; staged by Joseph Fields; designed and lighted by George Jenkins; presented by Robert Fryer and Lawrence Carr at the Broadhurst Theatre, October 24, 1955. The cast:

Sadel Meyer...Clarice Blackburn
Mr. Bennett...Frank Roberts
Peg Costello...Dorothy Blackburn
Ruthie Saylor...Anne-Marie Gayer
Richard Sumner...Byron Sanders
Bunny Watson...Shirley Booth
Abe Cutler...Frank Milan
Man in Shirtsleeves...Harry Ellerbe
Lady in Blue Suit...Mary Gildea
Kenny...Louis Gossett
Elsa...Joyce Van Patten
Miss Warriner...Elizabeth Wilson
Miss Rumble...Doris Roberts
A Reporter...Wayne Carson
Photographer...Sterling Jensen
Elsa's Friend...Mike Steen

wrung more laughs from Jenkins' amazing, satiric, electronic wizard. For its gyrations were calculated to tickle the funnybone.

Now, we don't go to the Broadhurst expecting to find a literary masterpiece. Or even a good solid play. You want.

But you will find Pixie Booth at her best, and that spells wonderful. A rollicking, frolicsome hit, in our book. Our Shirley is still the people's choice.

Journal American

October 25, 1955

Tough Battle For Shirley

Miss Booth and Fine Cast Strive Manfully Against Defiant Script

By JOHN McCLAIN

OFF-HAND IT WOULD seem almost impossible for anybody to devise a play which would stifle the charm and talents of Shirley Booth. But William Marchant, whose new comedy "The Desk Set" opened at the Broadhurst Theatre last night, gave it a game try. It is baffling to contemplate why Miss Booth should have chosen this vehicle; it is absolutely horrendous to think of what it would have been without her.

As it is there are a bundle of laughs scattered through the evening—but these are Miss Booth's private and personal contributions, unrelated to the circumstances or mo-

tivations of the proceedings. These would have been equally hilarious if she had appeared alone, without benefit of scenery, in something called "An Evening with Shirley Booth."

Draws Laughs

You have to laugh with her when she woozily decides that the Lexington bus is really the

Mexican bus, and nearly giggles herself off the chair in expanding the idea. You will take her to your heart when she delivers "The Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight," in jive tempo, and you will find other moments which are singularly touching and memorable. But you will be aware that almost none of these bear any relationship to the play.

It is difficult to imagine what a desk set has to do with "The Desk Set," since it is never mentioned, or why so many extremely capable actors found themselves crashing around the stage to so little avail: An efficiency expert invades a radio and television broadcasting company and endeavors to install a giant mechanical brain in the research department presided over by Miss Booth. Here we have Shirley and her three lady assistants pitting themselves against a gimmick, and when it is finally revealed that their jobs are not in jeopardy after all it comes as a surprise to nobody but the doorman at Sardi's, who happened to be hailing a taxi at the time.

Wins Audience

The impact of Miss Booth's

personality is such, however, that the first night audience went with her to the dying gasp. There was the feeling that the evening would come to life, that the play would take some shape, and when too little had happened too late the customers cheered her for a sincere effort against overwhelming odds.

In the large company Dorothy Blackburn, as one of her co-workers, gives a noble and occasionally rewarding performance; Frank Milan is excellent, within the limits of the stereotyped character, as the executive love interest. Other earnest contributions are offered by Clarice Blackburn, Anne-Marie Gayer, Byron Sanders (woefully miscast, I thought), Elizabeth Wilson, Joyce Van Patten and Louis Gossett.

The lovers of Miss Booth, who are obviously legion, will see her up to her old tricks, struggling manfully against a defiant script—but they'd better hurry. It is doubtful if this play will last once the theatre parties fade.

Won't somebody please write a good play for this gifted girl?

The New York Times

October 25, 1955

Theatre: Shirley Booth

By BROOKS ATKINSON

NO gentleman would be boorish enough to notice that Shirley Booth's new play is inadequate.

It is called "The Desk Set." It is by William Marchant. It opened at the Broadhurst last evening. Miss Booth plays the part of the head librarian in the reference department of a television and radio broadcasting company in midtown Manhattan.

Although Mr. Marchant seems not to have the stamina for the long pull, he can write brisk dialogue. And the first act of "The Desk Set" is amusing and promising. For Miss

Booth is not exactly the bureaucratic type. She is soft and bland. She has a gleam of mischief in her eyes. And, as everybody remembers from the days before "Come Back, Little Sheba," she has a real knack for the snappy rejoinder. You believe that she has just invented it on the spot, but you are not surprised. It all seems completely in character.

In the first act she is matching wits with an efficiency engineer who seems to be planning to replace her and her staff with an electronic brain. This is a highly entertaining beginning. For the head libra-

rian has not only a quick tongue but encyclopedic knowledge and a genius for remembering figures. Her lady-like devastation of the efficiency engineer is triumphantly amusing. As a deadpan comedian Miss Booth is wonderful because her face is round and innocent and her voice is homey. She looks as if she were about to bake a batch of popovers.

Like popovers, Mr. Marchant's comedy has nothing inside. The second act is set on the day before Christmas and follows the familiar formula—decorated tree, scads of greeting cards, presents, champagne, necking, the works. In the third act the stage is filled with the electronic brain and also with human dilemmas that the author has to solve for the final curtain. You can bet your boots that he succeeds. "The Desk Set" could

not have been more mechanical if Mr. Marchant had fed his formula into the electronic brain and waited ten seconds for the script.

Under Joseph Fields' direction, the performance is efficient. George Jenkins has designed an attractive reference library, accurate down to the philodendron on the bookshelf; and his electronic brain in the third act is ironically solemn and spectacular.

Everyone acts efficiently—Frank Milan as the cautious bachelor; Byron Sanders as the heartless engineer; Clarice Blackburn, Dorothy Blackburn, and Anne-Marie Gayer as learned librarians with flip tongues; Joyce Van Patten as an incendiary secretary on the prowl.

And Miss Booth radiates humor and charm all evening. She can do no wrong. Mr. Marchant is not that gifted.

DAILY NEWS

October 25, 1955

Shirley Booth Gives Needed Lift To 'Desk Set,' an Office Comedy

By JOHN CHAPMAN

A drunk scene has highlighted many a comedy—for instance, the solemn insobriety of the college prof and the eager-beaver student in "The Male Animal." Although

stew business in show business is usually the property of men, Shirley Booth, an actress who can do anything and do it well, indulges in some charged-up moments in "The Desk Set" and makes these moments the brightest in a fairly routine comedy.

William Marchant's "The Desk Set," which opened last evening at the Broadhurst, has a good enough idea, but the idea hasn't been too interestingly explored.

The notion is that an electronic brain with a fabulous memory is a dope in comparison with a few women who know their jobs. These women—the desk set—are researchers for a big broadcasting company. Backed by their stacked-up reference library, they can find the answer to any question while the asker holds the phone. Then an efficiency expert puts in an electronic brain and

the girls get pink slips and a fortnight's severance pay.

The Office Party

Most of the comedy is familiar office stuff, with a slight romance for Miss Booth thrown in, and a happy ending. Things don't get going until Christmas Eve, when each department has its tree and its drinks—the one time in the year when little girl clerks can kiss big bosses. It also is the one time of year when people are most likely to get fired.

Miss Booth, after visiting yon and hither and sampling that and this, gets a cheerful little bag on.

She has hysterics when one of her fozzled co-workers tells of waiting for a Mexican Avenue bus. It is delightful to watch her work this scene, because not for a second does she overdo it. She may be tipsy and excessively happy, but she remains a lady—and an intelligent one. It is, in fact, delightful to watch her do anything or hear her say anything; she makes Marchant's lines sound sharper than they are. But the play isn't up to her talents.

There are some pleasant performances by the supporting company, including Dorothy Blackburn, Byron Sanders, Frank Milan and, in particular, Elizabeth Wilson as a new type of office worker—the smug operator of an electronic brain. And scene designer George Jenkins has connected a convincing machine which whirs and beeps and has lights flashing all over the stage. Perhaps, with Miss Wilson feeding it the proper inquiries, this gismo could write a better comedy about itself than Marchant has turned out by hand.



New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

October 25, 1955

Shirley Booth in 'Desk Set'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Fans have been urging Shirley Booth for years to do a night club act. Now in "The Desk Set" at the Broadhurst she is just about doing it.

She tops her nearest competitors by doing it without music. But, if you think



she is not singing and dancing, you are an unimaginative purist.

There is a tipoff of what is to come, or was last night, in the way the star answered the massive applause heralding her original entrance. First, she gave the audience a great big wink, and a moment later calmed it down by blowing a kiss.

With a Boogie Beat.

Before long, she was reciting a few stanzas of "Hia-

watha," with a boogie beat that Longfellow could never have anticipated.

Still in Act One, she toys around with a lovely scene for any actress, a so called Personality Quiz. This lets her turn a cocky young efficiency expert into an enraged buffoon, playing his own game.

By Intermission Two, Miss Booth has delivered herself of a perfectly lovely drunk scene. Her alcoholic giggles

intend to make the onlookers hysterical, and succeed with vengeance.

The star has also touched an arpeggio of heart strings, lightly but memorably. And she has impertinently pronounced several measures of the elocutionist's old war-horse, "Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight," as if it had just been written for Lena Horne.

White Collar Dames.

Perhaps this sounds out of the ordinary. It is. These bits are hung with endearing charm and effortlessness, on the casual plot line of "The Desk Set." It recounts the effort to substitute an electronic brain for a chummy group of white collar dames who run a research department in a big network.

Except as a platform for Miss Booth—and what a vital